

The Kafkaesque Aspects of Things

Speech by Carl Bernstein. Delivered Feb 11, 2012.

I'm honored to be here and I have a little bit of a different role perhaps than some of the other speakers here today because I come here, as Patrick just said, as a journalist. That means, I hope, that I come here as an advocate of the best obtainable version of the truth. And obviously, at the same time, as someone who believes in basic human rights and their inalienable status.

And one of the most impressive aspects of what we've heard here today are about some basic truths and some basic words we've heard; evil, morality, terrorism. And what they mean and also one of the speakers referred to the Kafkaesque aspects of what we are discussing up here today, where up is down and down is up.

And who is responsible for the situation that we are discussing here today? Whether the real responsibility lies in Tehran or whether the real responsibility lies elsewhere.

So I want to try and put a little context on some of these aspects. Starting with the fact that Iran under both the Shah whom the MEK opposed and fought, and under the murderous bureaucracy that has followed and against whom the MEK has courageously fought. And Iran is one of the great tragedies of the modern era. The scale of the tragedy of the oppression, of the murder, is horrendous. A modern civilization, a great people thwarted, oppressed, murdered, and now back to this Kafkaesque aspect, seeing perhaps too often as pawns in a geopolitical chess game, even in Washington.

So the other aspect that I think we need to look at here is my profession, journalism. Because this is one of the great stories in the world today and it is intimately part of what is perhaps the greatest and most important story today in terms of the future of the world and that is, how does the world community deal with Iran? Because, again, back to that Kafkaesque notion, this is an evil place that has been created by those who now control 70 million people in Iran.

So, for years in America leading up to and including the McCarthy period and into the 1960s, we in America also have a list of so-called subversive organizations that supposedly were committed to something called the violent overthrow of the United States government; and those supposedly subversive organizations were not committed to any such thing in this country. And yet that list itself, like what we are talking about today, enforced by the Attorney General of the United States in this country for almost forty years, perverted American democracy and ruined the lives of thousands of Americans who became marginalized because they belonged to one or another of those organizations that were designated

subversive for political reasons, they were labeled the equivalent of domestic terrorists, and I know something about this both as a journalist and a citizen because my parents belong to such an organization that was on the Attorney General's list in the 1950s. So I know, like you, what it means to be designated a certain way and your cause and your purpose misunderstood, twisted, and turned into something that it is not. When, in fact, the evil, the terrorism, the real terrorism, is in the heart of Tehran, not in this room.

And I want to say to my colleagues in the press that this is a story we need to cover, especially the question of delisting, and the court case: i.e., what is going on in Washington regarding this, because this is the key to a larger question, which is the Iranian opposition. Let's be honest about this, let's talk about what this story is about.

And part of the story that my colleagues need to understand and point out and put on page one, is that the lines that cause so-called terrorist organizations that are designated as such for political purposes, and exiled and internal opposition movements that oppose repressive regimes, that these lines have always been there. And history shows a much more complex picture as today with your [MEK] example, when people are fighting for independence, when they are fighting for their rights, whether you are talking about the Irgun in Palestine before it was Israel, whether you are talking about the IRA, whether you are talking about Communist Poland, whether you are talking about refuseniks in the former Soviet Union.

This is a complicated story and it does not deserve the kind of simplistic reporting that we have seen on this story. It needs to get out of this Kafkaesque region.

One of the things that we do as journalists, the most important thing we do, is decide what is news. And this is news. And one of the things we do when we decide what is news is we decide what portion of the story is devoted to what we know to be fact and what portion of the story is devoted to what we know is lie. And yes, we put in there, in our stories, the part that is lie, but we have a responsibility to point out when that part of the story is lie.

And two, we have a responsibility not to inflate the lie and give it equal time to what we know is the truth. But rather, we as journalists, possess some information we hope our readers and viewers might not have, as in this situation, and we need to make some judgments about what is news. And what is news here is the listing that is serving the purpose of the Iranian regime. That is news.

It's not an accident that the people on this stage go from left to right, military to civilian, lawyer, advocate, that it runs the kind of gamut that you see up here. It's not an accident. Yet the duty of the press here is also to try and put in the context. As I say, sometimes there are going to be mistakes and overclaims made on behalf of your cause, and our duty is to point those out too so that people can have a record of what the real factual situation is.

We have a duty above all to the truth. But most of the truth in this situation is not as complicated as some say and is being turned upside down in this Kafkaesque effect, again, to quote what we heard here, situation.

The United States has a duty to 3500 people whose fate they left behind with the departure of American military forces. It's simple, it's something we stand for. It's a matter of international law. Why couldn't these people stay in the original Camp Ashraf until relocation in other countries is complete, we might ask.

The immediate story is what is happening to these people. Because there is a reason the Iranian regime is so concerned about them, because of who they are and the kind of diaspora they represent, what their role was in their native country. And, of course, these are the people whose witness, whose activism desires to change the regime. Of course these people desire to change the regime. So of course they are a threat.

But let's cover this story and understand the context in which they are a threat and why they are a threat. And the real issue about what is happening to these people is protecting them and their families under international law, under Fourth Geneva Convention. They are supposed to have protected person's status. And that is more than just a designation, it is measure of a meaningful civilized international conduct in which we all live.

Now, we are talking about, back to this context, about a region of the world that is the most dangerous -- nuclear-armed -- in the world. Where global confrontation is a constant threat and right now the world's focus is poised on that region because of the real threat posed by the Iranian nuclear initiative.

But it's also poised because the rest of the world has to find how to respond to that danger. And it is probably the most difficult decision that the post-Communist world order has had to confront. It is not a decision of easy answers like, "Bomb them." It doesn't work that way. I've looked at some of the intelligence, some of the people up here have looked at some of the intelligence, the generals up here can tell you it's not just as simple as just bomb them. This is one of the great challenges to the civilized decent world of our lifetime. And a lot hangs in the balance of how we in the United States, Israel, the surrounding region, the Arab world, the Muslim world, makes this decision and how it is dealt with.

And so to conflate and to misunderstand the role of MEK and those people in Ashraf is to add to the propaganda volume and take us away from the real story here, which is this terrible moment that we are at in trying to confront evil. And how do we confront evil in a way that protects us, protects decent values? So this is no kidding around where we are now.

And I know this because a week ago I went to talk to somebody who knows a lot about this. Somebody as about as high up as you can get in a national security bureaucracy, who has served Democratic presidents, served Republican presidents, said to me, if we or the Israeli's attack this spring or in the immediate future, it's a catastrophe. It's a catastrophe for the world and we have got to figure out how to deal with this. We can't just go in and do this.

And that's the larger context and perhaps, inexcusably, one of the reasons that you are getting such a bureaucratic run-around from the State Department. And it doesn't excuse it in any way — and Director Freeh is exactly right about the use of the courts.

Look, if the State Department has evidence that the MEK is a terrorist organization, have a show-cause hearing in court, let them prove it, let them do it. Because I think that it's obvious to all, and one of the reasons that we have to be on this story, is that this question needs to be decoupled from this terrible threat that the world faces right now and you should not be pawns in this geopolitical game.

But take a look at what goes on if there is an attack on Tehran and one of the great fears that you know about better than anyone and we've heard a lot about today. The nature of Iran as a terrorist state with a capability if such a conflagration comes about, to inflict terrorist acts all over the world, and particularly in this country if such a reaction becomes real and Tehran is bombed and the nuclear facilities are taken out.

And the one thing I know, and I think most of the people on the stage know is, is that if there is anything that the United States government is concentrated on in this moment, it is in trying to find a way to stop Iran's nuclear capability and to look at all options and to exhaust them, as Patrick suggested, before taking this last awful step that I refer to.

And think of the neighbors that we are dealing with as well here: about a nuclear Pakistan, which has perhaps a hundred nuclear weapons, half as many as China almost, and what the Pakistanis might do in the event that we or the Israelis were to bomb Tehran.

So there are a lot of questions that come cascading from what we started to talk about today about Ashraf. And they are all tied together and it's time that my profession, especially, starts making those connections.

So I'm here today to say that the most important thing that we need to do, I believe, is to free people to be truthful. And the people in Camp Ashraf have the ability to be truthful if they are free. So that becomes an obvious starting point. But there is also, when we get around to it in the press, we also need to look at the present Iraqi government and how it came to be that a war that we

initiated has ended up producing a state in Iraq which has the MEK imprisoned and has emboldened and strengthened Iran. That too is part of this story.

And perhaps the next time that my colleagues in the press are quite so easily influenced about why we should go to war, that we'll start to make some of these connections before we do so and while we still have a chance to get the best obtainable version of the truth -- just as our job in the next few weeks while this situation in Tehran, in Tel Aviv, in Washington, reaches critical mass or doesn't, we have an obligation to tie these ends together and to give our readers, and our viewers, and people around the world the best obtainable version about the truth about MEK, about the Iranian opposition, and about ultimately what is this Kafkaesque effect: and that is, who is ultimately responsible for this terror ... who have been the perpetrators?

Thank you very much.